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'It was deathly dull and boring and stressful': Listening to Parents Voices on Primary School Testing

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ABSTRACT: Many parents are unhappy with the way testing has altered, expanded and taken hold in Primary schools in recent years. Some parents chose to express their objections to Primary Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) in particular, through taking part in collective strike action. While research into testing abounds, the opinions of parents and their role in such activism remains less explored. This paper draws from a qualitative pilot study into parental opinions on Primary school testing. Here, some preliminary thematic analysis is presented, giving a flavour of the data. Parents are concerned with the effect and emotional stress on children, the content and structure of tests and with broader impact on the curriculum and on classroom teaching. They are impassioned, articulate and forthright.

'I just didn't feel happy about children being tested, being taught to tests. They were all being taught to pass these tests and I feel that it's in order to get a good Ofsted report. For the school to get a great Ofsted report, not for the sake of the child.'

Against a neo-liberal backdrop, there is an ever more present perception that a school may prioritise its reputation, Ofsted ranking or league table position, perhaps even at the expense of compromising the needs of its students. With increasing marketization in education, performativity and the standards agenda have taken hold (Ball, 2017). One manifestation of this is the changing nature of testing in Primary schools, from baseline assessments in Reception, through Year 2 Standardised Assessment Tests - or SATs - to the final assessments within the Primary school, the Year 6 SATs. Primary school testing has been in the spotlight as its purpose is scrutinised and the latest variations and their possible impacts are considered, debated and critiqued. Education researchers discuss the impact on children (Hutchings, 2015) and on their teachers (Braun and Maguire, 2018); they debate the merits of one particular element of the policy, one strand of new testing (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016), or consider the wider package of testing reforms more broadly (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

While research into various aspects of testing and its impact on students, teachers and schools is ever more available, the thoughts, opinions and attitudes of parents and certainly their role in any activism, remain less scrutinised. Many parents are not supportive of recent changes to Primary school testing: from challenging the introduction of formal assessments in Reception to opposing changes to the content and weight given to Year 6 SATs. In 2016, in what may be interpreted as an indication of the growing strength of feeling - and in what was arguably a novel step - some parents conveyed their doubts through taking part in collective strike action. Such voicing of discontent persists, in part through recurring organisation of local strike action and through growing initiatives to support teachers and schools to boycott assessments (Let Our Kids Be Kids, 2019).

This paper draws from a small scale, exploratory pilot study into parental opinions on Primary school testing. Explicitly this paper draws from semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2008) with three parents who took part in the collective strike action in May 2016. The interview data is analysed via a thematic approach to draw out the most prominent concerns (Ryan and Bernard 2003). Here some tentative preliminary results are presented, with underpinning data extracts to the fore, allowing the parents voices to come through. There are three dominant themes relating to these parents' thinking surrounding Primary SATs: (i) Concerns with the effect and emotional stress on children; (ii) Opinions on content and structure of tests; (iii) Concerns with broader impact on the curriculum and on classroom teaching; The interviewees, who had children from Year 2 to Year 6 at the time of the strike action, had much to contribute across these interrelated themes, all of which are discussed passionately. In what follows, the substance of each theme is elaborated, together with pertinent data extracts, supporting and illustrating the points. The parental voices are kept to the fore.

What the parents are saying:

Concerns with the effect and emotional stress on children

Education policy has a massive effect on our children and at the moment. Children are not prioritized, their well-being is not prioritised in that policy. It makes no sense to me.

He did find it actually really stressful.

So parents perceive not only that current policy does not prioritise their children's well-being but also that children do in fact experience stress around testing and test preparation. In terms of the effect on the students, the idea of stress recurs:

He found it boring and stressful, which is a horrible combination actually. Isn't it?

He's really stressed. He's not enjoying school at all. He's crying before school and not wanting to come in.

Here alongside the recurrent awareness of stress, there is perhaps a nod towards the dull, narrow nature of the testing and test preparation, as well as an indication for one boy of sustained, longer-term and substantial, negative affects from the run-up to testing. Another parent who echoes concerns over well-being, alludes instead to the soul-destroying legacy of testing:

If you crush a child's spirit when they are 7 or 11 or something, that's them screwed for a long time. Isn't it? In terms of their confidence, their self-esteem, you know, they might end up needing therapy and all kinds of stuff to get through it. You know?

The idea of early academic struggles and failure impacting future self-esteem is alluded to above. Arguably, there is also the tangential indication of being labelled a failure (Goffman, 2009). Being labelled as stupid perhaps permeates the following extract also:

Making him upset and making him feel frightened and stupid is not helping.

One parent - who was instrumental in bringing about local strike action for her area - was particularly well-informed about the rise in referrals to children's mental health services (ChildLine, 2015). In reflecting on testing, in light of this increase, she questions:

What are we doing to our kids? To the point that they are actually so stressed that they are actually having to have mental health services involved?

Finally, where matters of emotional stress are raised, the young age of Primary students is a repeated concern:

He felt he was under a lot of pressure and I just thought that wasn't fair for a child of ... 10... he was still 10 in the May you know and there was a huge amount of pressure on him.

(There was) a general feeling about being concerned about the future of their kids education - the ones who were just starting in Reception.

The well-being and mental health of the children is the main thrust here, with short term concerns surrounding pressure to perform in high stakes tests but crucially also longer term issues before and after the testing period itself. The importance and weight given to the assessments and the elongated preparation time, is upsetting and stressful for some students. Equally, the possibility of being labelled a failure by their performance, with the associated damage to self-esteem which this may inflict, is another repeated concern. There is also a clear sense that younger children are

at greater risk and should be protected from any such stress and labelling for as long as possible, preferably throughout their Primary school education. In this sense Year 6 SATs are seen as less harmful than their Year 2, or Reception counterparts.

We shouldn't be doing this to our kids... What are we doing?

Opinions on content and structure of tests

Some issues emerge which concern the tests more specifically. These relate to what is perceived as dry test content as well as to the hoop-jumping nature of the tests themselves. Parents question the suitability of the content, whether it is age-appropriate and whether it emphasises elements that are essential at all, in terms of education for life-skills. Furthermore, they question whether it helps or hinders learning, and whether or not it in fact stifles any love of learning. They also bemoan the inflexible, granular way the tests are marked and assessed, losing sight of more holistic achievements.

There were strong reactions to the focus in the English assessments on spelling, punctuation and grammar - or SPAG. For example, the emphasis on the use of grammatical terminology came under fire repeatedly:

I kind of knew that the teaching was going in an odd direction because he would bring the homework home and it would say 'Ask your child to underline all of the adjectives' and they used the word adjectives, and you'd get your child sometimes to read what the homework is. Now if they'd said 'talk with your child about describing words' sit down together; I'd be happy with that and in fact I ignored the homework. I turned it over and I said 'I'd like you to write a story and put in as many describing words as you can' and each time he came to a bit, like a tree, I'd say 'how would you describe the tree?' And he wrote down all the different words describing the tree. But they don't teach it like that. They teach it like 'What's the adjective', 'What's the adverb?' I mean why are they using words like that for a 7 year old? He was 6! 6 years old. I was so against that. So against it.

This impassioned extended extract details a parent's frustration at the focus on grammatical terminology. Her illustration of how she works around this whilst doing homework with her son, demonstrates clearly that she is not against the wider learning. Rather she is criticising the need to access that learning through technical language at such a young age. Another parent echoes these concerns with SPAG terminology, questioning whether such vocabulary used in the SPAG paper is really necessary at all. That is, whether it is in fact essential for a well-educated adult.

I mean my son loves creative writing. He loves writing stories. He loves words. He loves books. But it was just SPAG you know? It was just... I mean 'subordinating conjunctions' and 'fronted adverbials' you know? I don't know what they are and I've never needed to know what they are and I know people who have done degrees who don't know what they are... and I don't see why a 10 year old should know what they are. He is perfectly capable of structuring a sentence.

This focus on SPAG terminology is not simply seen as unhelpful and unnecessary but crucially also as a factor in undermining any love of learning.

He loves language, he loves books, he loves writing, he loves storytelling and to have English, our amazing language that we all use, reduced to this dry, horrible little, mealy-mouthed kind of mean stuff, you know, that actually made him depressed and miserable, was just rubbish.

They take a term and they squash all the fun out of it.

You know the way they are being treated is like they are 'little data machines,' you know, where you feed stuff in and other stuff comes out and you measure it. And that's not learning.

In the build up to the tests, homework is reportedly less varied and ever more focussed on memorising facts. Spellings and timetables become more and more common.

I'm sure they've done spellings because they've been told to, because they have to, for the new assessments.

Changing aspects of the mathematics testing, in particular the renewed emphasis on rote learning of times-tables, receive criticism similar to some of that aimed at SPAG:

They are doing their times tables in a more structured way. We keep getting little bits of paper home that says 'This week, your child will be having a test on their four times table.' 'Next week your child will be having a test on their eight times table'... That's new definitely and so, you feel very much that they are doing it in a more structured way ... but not in a very exciting way.

I don't see it as progress in terms of instilling a love of learning and a good approach to learning. I think it's more a sense of we've got to get through these things and you've got to do them. You've got to know your spellings and your times tables but that doesn't mean they are really learning how to learn, in any sort of exciting way.

So particular aspects of the content of the English and Mathematics assessments loom large for these parents. These aspects are seen as dominating the learning as students are prepared for heavily-influential assessments. Parents criticise the focus on rote learning - whether it is of times-tables in Mathematics or of SPAG terminology, the latter of which they perceive as arguably unnecessary at any age. They oppose the focus on memorising, as they see it going hand-in-hand with stifling any love of learning. These elements are not only criticised for their influence on classroom and homework practice prior to the assessments, but also for the way in which they impact the marking and final level for the students. Parents condemn tick-box, granular marking criteria as allowing no space for more holistic achievements to gain credit.

The teacher said to me: 'He is above standard according to what I see of his imagination, the quality of his writing and yet I have to mark him as below standard because... he didn't put his full stops in certain places and his capital letters in certain places.

Like I was told, by the teacher, after he failed his SATs... that his writing ability and his vocabulary was very rich. He's got a very rich, complex sentence structure. She showed me his stories which were just beautiful and had great descriptions, which were beyond an age, that of a normal child. And yet he failed his SATs because he didn't put full stops in sometimes and he didn't put in capital letters.

The parents do not think these elements of punctuation unimportant; they think simply that other aspects of writing--description and creativity for instance--are under-weighted or over-looked in favour of grammatical detail. Another parent, in condemning the latest assessments specifically for what she perceives as the raising of the bar, returns to the interrelated idea of labelling:

I mean the other thing about this years exams is they made them much, much harder. Someone who got a Level 5 the year before was now seen as failing. What was the point of that? What is the point of looking at where the average is and going OK let's make it so hard that hardly anyone can pass? What is that telling our kids? 'You are all failures. You are all stupid.'

Just as the first two emergent themes overlap and are hard to disentangle, so the criticisms and doubts surrounding the tests themselves interlink with resentment of their impact on enjoyment, creativity and the wider curriculum.

He found it thoroughly boring and he doesn't remember any of it. I mean if I asked him to say what a 'fronted adverbial' was, he doesn't know and he doesn't care. You know? And why should he really? Coz kids learn when they are engaged, they learn when they are interested, they learn when they are given something to get their teeth into, you know, that is creative and fun.

Concerns with broader impact on the curriculum and classroom teaching;

The concerns emerging, which relate to knock-on effects on classroom teaching and the curriculum, stem from the increased emphasis on Mathematics and English – and in fact only narrow elements of these. There is recognition that this comes at the expense of all other elements of the curriculum, the creative arts in particular, and furthermore that innovation, discovery and varied approaches to learning are all put on hold while the children are drilled in preparation for the test.

One parent recounts how their child's teacher set the tone to lower expectations of enjoyment, right from near the outset of Year 2:

In the second week she said 'This year's not going to be much fun because of SATs'. Because of SATs, already!... He's in Year 2, this is 7, at the start of Year 2, she said, 'As the year goes on it's going to get less fun.' Who says that to a group of 7 year olds who you've just met?

So this would tend to imply that it could well be much of Year 2, as well as much of Year 6, which is impacted by the upcoming assessments. Despite the above remark, these parents are in fact not unsympathetic towards the teachers. They see them as subject to the pressures brought about by the wider education, curriculum and assessment policies. They see both teacher and students as trapped in a less positive learning environment as a direct consequence of the power and reach of the testing regime.

My concern is more that it makes the teaching boring and puts the teachers under so much pressure, that they don't get to do anything exciting and innovative and the kids don't get really engaged with their learning, because they're having to make sure that they are going to get through the tests.

The configuration of lessons, the adoption of what is seen as business terminology and the consequent repetitive structure, rigidity and procedure, all come under criticism as factors, which encroach on varied, more enjoyable approaches to learning.

Coz for him learning is like starting a lesson going 'Today our learning objective is blah, blah, blah and then you get to the end and 'Have I met my learning objective?' It's just 'management speak' isn't it? It's not about the joy of being a child and playing with stuff, finding stuff out.

As tests and formal learning impact all aspects of schooling, there is resentment at the lack of time for playing and socialising.

I mean they've cut back on playtime, so as a child in general going from Reception, to Year 1 to Year 2, as they get older the play decreases and the learning increases, so he became unhappier as time went on.

It is the narrowing of the curriculum to allow a greater proportion of time for English and Mathematics, which is raised the most.

Basically for about 6 months they didn't do anything else. They just did SATs prep. Literally every day, you know, it was just Maths and English, Maths and English, Maths and English, Maths and English.

Literally, day after day, after day, of nothing but Maths and SPAG.

When we used to go to parent teacher meetings and all of the books, the Maths books were really thick, the English books were really thick, the Art book was just (gestures thin)... there wasn't a great amount in it.

This emphasis on test contest and core subjects leaves little or no room for other subjects in the curriculum. The downgrading of the Arts and of what are perceived as the more creative elements of the curriculum, is repeatedly lamented:

But what you're saying basically is 'we don't value the Arts'... They stopped doing all of it. They stopped doing any of it.

Like he used to bring home drawings every day. The drawings just started to disappear and then there were no drawings.

One parent explicitly contrasts the tedium and the diminishing breadth of subjects in Year 6, with the variety and stimulation of previous years:

Years 3, 4, 5 were really fun, you know. There was loads of stuff about Egyptians and Romans and Science and you know there was stuff to really enjoy. And then Year 6 which you know, was his last year with a lot of those friends, some of his friends are off to other Secondary schools, so it was his last year with that group of kids who he had known since he was four, and it was deathly dull and boring and stressful ...and you know ... there was no fun. There was like a couple of days of camp at the beginning and there was a disco at the end and in-between was just rubbish basically, was just SPAG.

Another parent who similarly regrets the lack of stimulation and enjoyment in the narrowed, monotonous curriculum, succinctly summarises:

He is hardly ever really excited and enthused about anything he's doing at school, which seems a shame.

This echoes previously noted concerns that the focus on testing may stifle any love of learning. So the test preparation, and the accompanying narrowing of the curriculum to facilitate this, are seen as going hand-in-hand, in terms of sapping the excitement from the classroom experience.

Comments and Possible Ways Forward

The data presented from this small-scale pilot study are oftentimes hazy and always subjective. The accompanying analysis and the themes drawn out are tentative, overlapping and blurry. Nevertheless, the fervour with which these few parents express their thoughts and opinions is clear. They feel strongly about the way Primary testing is changing as well as the impact this is having on their children's schooling. They are concerned with implications for holistic development, a varied and broad curriculum and instilling a love of learning. They agonise about possible consequences for their children in terms of well-being, raising concerns from tedium and loss of engagement, to stress and labelling.

With the note of caution in extrapolating deeply personal experiences beyond the individuals, the particular spaces, and moments involved, some 'fuzzy propositions and generalizations' (Bassey 1999, p11) will be briefly touched on.

In terms of moving forward from the present set-up, these parents are clear that they do not want the current evolution of Primary testing to continue. They are vocal and critical. Indeed, they chose to take part in strike action against the testing. They did not however boycott the tests and had shared rationales for not doing so.

I mean, I think, the thing is, if I could have just kept him off on the days – I mean there were quite a few days – there was a whole week. Maybe I would have done. But I think what the school would have done is just make him retake.

The reason I didn't want to actually boycott the tests themselves is because ... I think they would have made them retake them on another day, on his own and I thought if you are going to do them, far better to do them at the same time as all your friends ... and I didn't want to single him out. I didn't want him to be the kid with the bossy, shouty mum, you know.

If it was just a question of some tests on one day then I might of done but I think the thing is he still would have had six months of doing nothing but SPAG because that's all they were doing for literally six months SPAG, SPAG, SPAG.

The argument in Year 2 concerns the belief that students would simply be made to sit tests on another day. In Year 6 it is about firstly having to miss many days of school, since the tests are spread out, and secondly, that this would still not address the equally detrimental, longer-term impact on the curriculum. These parents do not want the testing but do want the schools, the teachers and the government to address their concerns, so that they do not have to disadvantage or single out their own child. They would continue to support teachers and schools who undertook SATs boycotts. Here one parent makes this clear, in reflecting on why they originally took part in collective strike action:

I have felt that the teaching in school is not very exciting, not very inspiring, so you feel that that's possibly because the teachers are under too much pressure to meet targets and get the kids through tests. And so if I could support the initiative to release that pressure, then I should be part of it ... It was more feeling that it might, in some small way, help to bring about change and make education more exciting again.

More dynamic, inspiring and exciting teaching is what is sought then. It is important to acknowledge that these parents do not blame teachers for the current situation.

The teachers aren't the problem. They are just doing their jobs. The problem is the policies they are being asked to enact are insane. They are not based on anything that is actually good for children.

Moreover, they are more than happy for teachers to monitor their children's progress. They value this. It is the dominating, rigid, pervasive testing regime which they see as damaging and which they resent and oppose. They would prefer to trust in each individual teacher's professionalism.

I'm happy for teachers to benchmark the children because I'm happy that the teachers are professional, you know, they are doing an amazing job. So I'm happy for the teachers to benchmark, within the school and that's fine. But not to do actual testing and benchmarking across the country with government set guidelines.

These parents are as supportive and clear about what they value and want, as they are critical of what they see as harmful.

In a final note critiquing the testing regime and in praise of diversity and encouragement, the spectre of neoliberalism is again evident:

I don't want our children to be thought of as these little 'economic units' that you just, you know, you shove information in and then they go out and pay their taxes. That seems to be the government stance. I think they are individual people who should be encouraged.

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